

The 'Strathspey Spring' of the 1880s and 1890s and the Parish of Cromdale

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In eighteen hunder an' eighty six,
The Cromdale clique began their tricks
An' when, or where, the dirdum en's,
Guid save us! ne'er a mortal kens.¹

On 15 October 1886 the established Church of Scotland parish of Cromdale became vacant. Despite the then abundant supply of potential ministers, it was to be 14 March 1889 before Revd John McCowan was translated from Duncansburgh, Fort William, and inducted to the charge. The attempts of the congregation to choose their new minister had by then become known as 'The Cromdale Case': a complex series of appeals and petitions that shuttled between the congregation, the Presbytery of Abernethy and the Synod of Moray. An appeal to the General Assembly was tabled. The procedure of the Presbytery was successfully challenged in the

The author is grateful for consent granted by kind permission of The Right Honourable The Earl of Seafield to access the Papers of the Ogilvie-Grant family, Earls of Seafield (Seafield Papers, NRS GD248) and especially to cite sections of the polemical poem 'Vagaries of the Cromdale School Board'.

¹ From the unpublished vernacular poem 'The Cromdale Vacancy' (c. 1888), kindly made available [2013] by Billy Campbell, Upper Port, Cromdale.

civil Court of Session.² Not surprisingly, the local – and indeed the Scottish – newspapers gave considerable coverage to the 'dirdum': it was said that 'the Cromdale people have attained a notoriety unique in the history of the Church of Scotland'.³ After McCowan's induction the divisions lingered, provoking further legal action. This article explores these events of the 1880s and 1890s against the background of wider social and political movements in Strathspey, seeking to identify ways in which aspirations for greater democracy, the struggle of the 'masses against the classes', impacted on church life. Evidence from the grassroots will thus be brought to explicate the suggestion, made by Revd Prof. Alec Cheyne in his *The Transforming of the Kirk*, that 'the onset of mass democracy, the spread of literacy ... and the rise of a cheap press' adjusted the Scottish churches' interaction with secular society, sometimes described as moving from 'passive obedience' towards 'prophetic protest' during the second half of the nineteenth century.⁴

² *Dunbar v. The Presbytery of Abernethy*: see Edinburgh, NRS, CS240/D/1/2: 'A note of suspension and interdict for William Dunbar, farmer, Rynaballoch, and others, communicants and adherents of the congregation of the Church and Parish of Cromdale, in the Presbytery of Abernethy, in the Synod of Moray, against the Presbytery, to have the respondents interdicted from following out the alleged election and appointment to the church by the congregation of the Revd John McCowan, as Minister, by proceeding to induct or admit him.'

³ 'The Cromdale Vacancy: More Difficulties to the Popular Candidate: No Election Yet', *Elgin Courant and Courier*, 11 November 1887.

⁴ A. C. Cheyne, *The Transforming of the Kirk: Victorian Scotland's Religious Revolution* (Edinburgh, 1983) pp. 132-33; D. C. Smith, *Passive Obedience and Prophetic Protest: Social Criticism in the Scottish Church 1830-1945*, American University Series, series IX, History vol. 15, (New York, 1987) p. 9 also asked 'how did the church react' to 'far-reaching movements ... for example, the political reform movement ... leading within a century to full political democracy'.

Following the 1874 Church Patronage (Scotland) Act, the right to elect ministers of the established Church of Scotland was vested by law in the congregations of the parishes, acting by means of committees chosen by the congregations, the entire process being governed by regulations approved by the General Assembly. The Act was part of the gradual democratisation of British society during the nineteenth century, of which the headline events were the Parliamentary Reform Acts (1832, 1867, 1884) which, with the Ballot Act (1872) and the Corrupt and Illegal Practices Prevention Act (1883), greatly widened the male franchise and provided for free elections by secret ballot. In addition the Poor Law Amendment Act (1845) and the Education (Scotland) Act (1872) placed poor relief and provision of compulsory elementary education under elected Parochial and School Boards. Because the British state had the ability gradually to adjust its political processes to meet the rising expectations of an increasingly educated and mobile population, no single British 'springtime' event or year is normally identified, to use the somewhat fluid metaphor applied to (among others) the 1848 European risings, the 1968 Prague Spring, and the recent Arab Spring. Nevertheless I suggest that a 'spring-like' climate of opinion within Strathspey lay behind the turmoil of the Cromdale case.

Cromdale in the later nineteenth century was reckoned within the established church 'as one of the most important parishes in the Highlands' as the bulk of the population adhered to the Church of Scotland.⁵ There was no Free Kirk, though some families belonged

⁵ Petition of Revd James Bain to the Presbytery of Abernethy (8 January 1889), as reported in 'The Presbytery of Abernethy and the Cromdale Case', *Scottish Highlander*, 17 January 1889.

to the Grantown Baptist and Free Churches.⁶ Historically the landlord (and sole heritor before 1874) was the Earl of Seafield, though after the 1884 death of Ian Charles Ogilvie-Grant, the eighth Earl, the Seafield estates were administered by commissioners for his mother, Caroline, the Countess Dowager, rather than for the ninth Earl who inherited only the title.⁷ Since 1870 wholly within Elginshire, part of the Parliamentary constituency of Elginshire and Nairnshire, part of the heartland of Clan Grant, Cromdale was on the edge of the Gaelic-speaking Highlands: census records show that most of the population understood Gaelic, but that very few knew no English.⁸

By the 1880s the boundaries of the civil and ecclesiastical parishes of Cromdale had diverged. In the eighteenth century, the name had stood for the union of Cromdale, Advie and Inverallan. Inverallan, however, comprising the town of Grantown-on-Spey, the environs of nearby Castle Grant and the settlement at Dulnain Bridge, had been erected as a *quoad sacra* parish in 1869. Founded as a new, planned, town in 1765 by James Grant of Grant, by the later nineteenth century Grantown-on-Spey had become a

⁶ G. Jeffery, *Lethendry, Cromdale, Scotland to Braemora, Oamaru, New Zealand: The Strathspey, Scotland origins of the Alec Robertson and Annie Grant family and their emigration to North Otago, New Zealand* (Christchurch, 1998), p. 79f. My thanks to the author for supplying me with the text of this book, though without the page-numbering of the printed edition.

⁷ 'Subscribed and Presented by The Tenants And Friends Of Her Son, To The Countess Dowager Of Seafield', *In memoriam: Ian Charles, eighth Earl of Seafield, twenty-seventh chief of the Clan Grant* (Inverness, 1884).

⁸ For the purposes of this research I took the boundaries of Cromdale to correspond with the Cromdale (or Cromdalc and Advie) registration districts 1 to 6, and also outlying district 8 of the parish of Abernethy (centred on Congash farm) as its population can be shown to be connected to Cromdalc Church. Census records via the website <http://scotlandspeople.gov.uk/> [accessed 1 June 2013].

prosperous trading centre.⁹ Similarly, the smaller down-stream district of Advie, having had a mission church since 1861, was also moving in the direction of *quoad sacra* status. For civil purposes, however, both the Cromdale Parochial Council and the Cromdale School Board retained the old, broader boundaries; so, too, after reform of Scottish local government, did the first Parish Council of 1895.

Spanning both banks of the middle reaches of the River Spey, the residual Church of Scotland parish of Cromdale lacked a village centre of any size and contained small to medium farms rather than crofts.¹⁰ The Hon. T. C. Bruce MP, Commissioner on the Seafield Estates, explained estate policy to the Napier Commission in 1883: their aim was to encourage self-contained arable and cattle farms, dependent on their own adjacent fields and not on common grazing.¹¹ Cromdale had not therefore suffered the sort of clearance seen further north and the Earl, chief of Clan Grant, was also reputed to follow a humane policy towards his tenants. Bruce stated: 'It was the express wish of the late Lord Seafield that none of his tenants should be removed [during a review of holdings] and accordingly we

⁹ H. Woolmer, 'Grantown-on-Spey: An Eighteenth-Century New Town', *The Town Planning Review* vol. 41, No. 3 (July, 1970) via <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40102709> [accessed 6 July 2013].

¹⁰ *Black's Morayshire Directory 1863* (Elgin, 1863), pp. 40–42; cited in Woolmer, 'Grantown-on-Spey', p. 246: 'In the parish of Cromdale, on the other hand, 139 farmers and 21 crofters are listed, with only a handful of tradesmen and craftsmen, such as three merchants, two blacksmiths and three millers.' N. Tranter, *The Queen's Scotland: The North East* (London, 1974) pp. 201–204, gives a useful description of 'Cromdale and Advie'.

¹¹ Evidence of The Hon. T. C. Bruce MP, Commissioner on the Seafield Estates, to the Napier Commission: *Evidence Taken By Her Majesty's Commissioners of Inquiry into the Conditions of the Crofters and Cottars in the Highlands and Islands of Scotland* (1884) IV, pp. 3004–3015, via <http://www.whc.uhi.ac.uk/research-old/napier-commission> [accessed 26 June 2013] Hereafter cited as *The Napier Commission*.

had to divide the land according to the number of tenants, and not according to the way one would abstractly like to do it'. Development of moor and hill land for commercial forestry was nevertheless a Seafield objective: land was found from former commonry and by adjusting the boundaries of tenanted farms.¹² Fencing enhanced natural regeneration of existing historic woodland.¹³ In consequence the Napier Commission heard the complaint that 'As things are at present, what with deer forests and plantations, almost all the grazings held in former days in conjunction with the various holdings, large and small, are done away with. ... In the parish of Cromdale planting is also hemming in the crofter to a very hurtful extent'.¹⁴ Moreover the estate opposed subdivision of tenancies. T. C. Bruce again: 'We have not very many of the very small crofter class; and I confess I am not very much inclined to increase that class'. In consequence crofts in Cromdale and Advie were few, while farms tended to be small: of 110 listed in

¹² NRS, Seafield Papers, GD248/3363: George G. Mackay, 'Reports and valuations on the farms in the Strathspey estates' (Inverness, 1867). See, for example, entry no. 325.

¹³ 'The Thirtieth Annual Excursion, August 1907', *Transactions of the Royal Scottish Arboricultural Society* (1908), p. 95; H. M. Steven, 'Changes in Silvicultural Practice in Scotland, 1854-1953', *Scottish Forestry* (1954: Centenary Volume), pp. 49-50.

¹⁴ Evidence of Francis Macbean, Commission Agent, Grantown, *The Napier Commission*, IV, p. 2993.

the 1881 census,¹⁵ only seven comprised 100 or more arable acres, while 96 farms had 50 or less arable acres at a time when twelve acres might occupy a man's full-time labour.¹⁶ These farms, beyond the tenant and his (sometimes *her*) often large family, might have a single resident ploughman and no grieve; they were markedly smaller than the hierarchical establishments of Aberdeenshire.¹⁷ Nevertheless, a tenant farmer had a distinctively different status from a farm servant: such men would expect local recognition and respect.¹⁸

By the 1880s four industries beyond farming and forestry had arrived in Strathspey: the sporting lodges with their actively managed salmon beats and deer forests; the railways; the summer-holiday visitors; and the distillery. As to the first, the Seafield estate rented lodges in the Advie district with fishing on the Spey to ultra-wealthy businessmen: Arthur D. Sassoon at Tulchan Lodge and George F. McCorquodale at Dalcroy. Such contact with the south was of course facilitated by the railways. Grantown was serviced by

¹⁵ See note 8 above for the census districts studied for this article. Acreage figures here and shown in brackets elsewhere in the article come from extended descriptions of farmers written in the 'Occupation' section of enumerators' 1881 census returns and are admittedly broadbrush. Crofts had no acre-notes attached to their census entries. Other descriptions of the size of holdings in Cromdale can be found in NRS, Seafield Papers, GD248/3363: 'Reports and valuations on the farms in the Strathspey estates', and elsewhere within the Seafield papers; also NRS, SC2/40/36 (Banff Sheriff Court): Will of Ian Charles Ogilvie-Grant, earl of Seafield, 1885; NRS, IRS74/12: Valuation Office (Scotland): Field Book: Cromdale Parish (1913).

¹⁶ Charlie Allan, *The Truth Tells Twice, The life of a north-east farm* (Edinburgh, 2009), p. 88.

¹⁷ Ian Carter, *Farm Life in Northeast Scotland 1840-1914: The Poor Man's Country* (Edinburgh, 1979) pp. 137-138 and following.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 137: Carter writes of the 'tyrannical patriarchy of the family farm'.

two stations from 1863: one on each side of the Spey. That in the town belonged to the Highland Railway, running north from Perth through Aviemore up to Forres, while the Great North of Scotland's line ran from its junction with the Highland Railway at Boat of Garten down the east bank of the Spey to Dufftown and Keith.¹⁹ Besides enabling regular, relatively rapid and reliable transport of people and goods, the railways offered hourly employment to local men as 'surfacemen' (labourers). The better educated, salaried, Railway Agents – station masters and clerks – tended to move around the country as more responsible posts became available. The railways also brought the summer visitors, typically well-to-do Scots from the southern cities who rented homes for a period of weeks, attracted to the small towns of Badenoch and Strathspey by their reputations as health resorts complete with bowling greens and golf and tennis clubs.²⁰ Meanwhile the Great North of Scotland line specialised in supporting Strathspey's distilleries: its station at Cromdale serviced the Balmenach Distillery, one of the first to be licensed under the 1823 Act. Run by the family of James MacGregor, its founder, in conjunction with their Balmenach and Burnside farms (800 acres, 341 arable),²¹ the combined enterprise was by far the largest commercial venture in the parish and its more senior staff (and the associated resident Inland Revenue officials) often came from outside Cromdale.

The vacancy of 1886 was the first time that Cromdale had had the opportunity of electing a parish minister. Communicant members began by choosing a Congregational Committee, which then had the

¹⁹ B. B. Bishop, *Lost Badenoch and Strathspey* (Edinburgh, 2011) pp. 188–98; Neil T. Sinclair, *Highland Railway: People and Places* (Derby, 2005), map on p. 8.

²⁰ The practice is well described in Sir Robert Bruce Lockhart, *My Scottish Youth* (Edinburgh, 1993), pp. 156–7, 167, 184–198.

²¹ Bruce Lockhart, *My Scottish Youth*, pp. 18–22, 27. For the acreage of Balmenach farm, see notes 8 & 15 above.

duty of nominating a name or names of potential ministers to a further full meeting of the congregation for election. The committee elected by that autumn was chaired by John MacGregor of Balmenach, then owner of the distillery complex. Also elected were Robert Grant of the Haugh (the local post office and the Cromdale store); James Slater, the Cromdale schoolmaster; and ten farmers only one of whom – James McQueen – was an elder of the parish.²² The group appears to have been chosen in recognition of their local social status, while existing congregational office-bearers were overlooked. Moreover intimation of the meeting to choose the committee had been made only in Cromdale Parish Church. As a result that proportion of the congregation that worshipped in Advie Mission Church had failed to attend and no one from Advie was elected to the committee. Some of the staunch Advie churchmen were, in consequence, deeply offended: from this came some of the bitterness of the Cromdale case as the verbatim reports of congregational meetings testify:

Mr Grant, Delliefure, Cromdale, said he did not see why they should have any from Advie on the committee at all. They could get plenty in Cromdale to act without going to Advie – (applause).

The Moderator – It rests entirely with yourselves.

Mr Mackenzie, Achvochkie, Advie, – Does the Moderator allow remarks of that kind? Are not the Advie people on the roll? ... If the existence of the Advie people had not been ignored hitherto, this might not have happened today.

The Moderator – I must not allow remarks of this kind, because they were not ignored.

Mr Rose, Culfoichmore, Cromdale – I say they were not ignored. This is the first time they have put in an appearance. It was quite open for

²² 'Cromdale Church Vacancy: Postponement of Election', *Elgin Courier and Courier*, 18 February 1887.

them to come to the first meeting.

Mr Mackenzie – We got no intimation.²³

Events in the case between 1886 and 1889 must be reviewed very quickly.²⁴ The Congregational Committee chaired by MacGregor of

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ The narrative in this paragraph is drawn from four main sources: newspaper reports in *Grantown Supplement* [GS hereafter] and *Elgin Courant and Courier* [ECC hereafter]; the minutes of the Presbytery of Abernethy [NRS, CH2/437/5 passim] and the original papers of *Dunbar v. The Presbytery of Abernethy*, from the Court of Session [see note 2 above]. The relevant minute book/s of the Synod of Moray appear to have been lost, not being held by the National Records of Scotland (Edinburgh), The Highland Archive Centre (Inverness) [hereafter HAC] or the Local Heritage Centre, Elgin. The Synod held on 27 September 1887 was reported in 'The Synod of Moray, Elgin', GS, 1 October 1887 and in the subsequent Presbytery minute, NRS, CH2 /437/6, p. 4. The Synod of 24 April 1888 was reported in 'The Established Synod of Moray and the Cromdale Vacancy', *Scottish Highlander*, 26 April 1888. Citations for the Congregational meetings are as follows: on 13 February 1887: 'Cromdale Church Vacancy: Postponement of Election', ECC, 18 February 1887 and 'Cromdale Notes', GS, 19 February 1887; on 22 March 1887: 'The Cromdale Church Vacancy: Election Again Postponed', ECC, 25.3.87 and 'Cromdale Notes', GS, 26 March 1887; on 14 June 1887: 'The Cromdale Parish Church Vacancy', ECC, 17 June 1887; on 5 July 1887: 'The Vacancy at Cromdale: Appointment again Deferred', ECC, 8 July 1887; on 8 November 1887: 'Cromdale Vacancy', GS, 12 November 1887, 'Cromdale Parish Vacancy' and 'The Cromdale Vacancy: More Difficulties for the Popular Candidate: No Election Yet', ECC, 11 November 1887; on 22 November 1887, 'The Cromdale Church Vacancy: Conference with Commissioners', ECC, 22.11.87; on 10 May 1888, 'The Cromdale Vacancy', ECC, 11 May 1888. Revd John McCowan's departure from his first charge of Duncansburgh, Fort William, and his induction to Cromdale were fully reported in: 'Fort William Parish Church: Revd Mr McCowan's Farewell Address' and 'Induction at Cromdale: Congregational Meeting', both in *Oban Times*, 16 March 1889.

Balmenach reported to the congregation in February 1887 the names of three possible candidates for the charge: on a vote it was decided not to proceed to elect, and on a subsequent vote the committee was dismissed and a second committee formed under the chairmanship of William Grant of Waulkmill, Session Clerk. The new committee included key Advie members; and its sole nominee preached in both Cromdale and Advie churches. MacGregor of Balmenach and his supporters rallied, however, and at the next congregational meeting the new nomination was rejected and the second committee dismissed. By March, MacGregor was again chair of a third committee. Following advice from the Interim Moderator, he approached the Presbytery to request an extension beyond the six months then given to the congregation to elect their minister before the right of appointment fell to the Presbytery. A further three months were (apparently) granted and the congregation met in June 1887 to vote between three nominated ministers. At this point Revd John McCowan gained a slender absolute majority; but, when asked to vote 'yes or no' to elect and appoint him, the congregation instead followed the advice of John MacGregor and James Grant, Upper Delliefure, by referring the matter to the Presbytery. On being instructed by the Presbytery to take this final vote, the congregation elected McCowan by 119 to 93, but, being informed of this, the Presbytery decided McCowan was too contentious and refused to appoint. Moreover the Presbytery now took the view that, six months having expired since the beginning of the vacancy, the congregation had lost their right to elect: the voting at the recent meeting was deemed simply advisory. Appeals to the Synod of Moray twice overturned the Presbytery and restored days from the six months to the congregation; and finally McCowan was again elected by 127 to 107 in May 1888. A group of farmers initiated and withdrew an appeal to the General Assembly. A different group of smallholders then applied to the Court of Session to interdict McCowan's induction on the ground that his election had taken

place beyond the statutory time limit. Lord Wellwood finally ruled that Cromdale's Interim Moderator had misled the congregation with incorrect advice and that the procedural errors of the Presbytery and the Congregational Committee, as identified by the Synod, should not remove the rights granted the congregation by Parliament. He refused the injunction and sustained McCowan's election. John McCowan therefore became the established minister of Cromdale on 14 March 1889.

Divisions within the congregation were aggravated by the controversial status of members resident in Advie. On 15 October 1886 they were admittedly on the congregational roll of the parish of Cromdale – albeit they normally worshipped in their own Mission Church, led by a missionary minister. Already, however, the legal process was in train to create Advie as an independent parish *quoad sacra* and Revd John Liddell was inducted as first minister of the new parish on 18 October 1888. Whose votes, then, really counted – or *ought* to count – for the election of Cromdale's next minister? Supported by the editor of the *Elgin Courier and Courier*, the Presbytery at one point sought to determine the view of the majority of 'those worshipping in Cromdale Parish Church':²⁵ not, it was thought, necessarily the same view as that of the majority of those eligible to vote. Having had their rights ignored at the start of the vacancy, however, there were those in Advie who were determined to insist on being heard: 'The Advie section are still resolutely bent on having their finger in the pie. They are kept up to fighting pitch by one or two of their number who are animated by personal pique and who are about as magnanimous as a Red Indian on the war path.'²⁶ John McCowan was proposed for election on 14 June 1887

²⁵ Leader, *Elgin Courier and Courier*, 6 December 1887: 'If they act now in accordance with the wishes of those usually worshipping in Cromdale Parish Church ... they will be following a course that will at least commend itself to onlookers who ... desire to see justice done.'

²⁶ 'Cromdale Notes', *Grantown Supplement*, 28 May 1887.

by Michael J. Macpherson (Straan, Advie), son of Peter Macpherson, an elder and the head gamekeeper at Tulchan Lodge. Michael, already an arts graduate, was training for the ministry of the established Church and proved to be a capable advocate for his faction.

Beyond the Advie/Cromdale divide, the perception grew that the congregation was also split between the local 'establishment' and the local 'canaille', so that John McCowan became increasingly known as the 'popular candidate'.²⁷ One aspect of this was the division between those considered community leaders (MacGregor of Balmenach, Grant of the Haugh, Slater the schoolmaster, Grant of Upper Delliefure – a farmer well known at the northern marts) as opposed to those who were elders in the church.²⁸ Of the former group, an anonymous local poet wrote: 'A wheen o' self appointed goaks | That thocht to ride o'er decent folks'.²⁹ Also opposed to the local 'establishment' was a collection of men and women from the smaller farms, brought together by Robbie Adam, Achroisk (20 acres, 16 arable) – then aged 69. 'Big Robbie Adam, decent cheil',³⁰ one poet thought him, but others had different views. An article in the local weekly reported:

It was disgraceful that Mr Forsyth [the Interim Moderator of Cromdale, minister of Abernethy] should be subjected to the vulgar impertinences and the shameless insults of the howling fanatics who surrounded Robbie Adam at the recent congregational meeting. Robbie's behaviour was of course characteristic and intelligible, but surrounded

²⁷ Cf 'The Cromdale Vacancy: More Difficulties for the Popular Candidate: No Election Yet', *Elgin Courant and Courier*, 11 November 1887.

²⁸ Seconding John McCowan's election in June 1887 was William Fraser of Faebuie, Cromdale (10 acres, 6 arable): Fraser, like Peter Macpherson, was a Cromdale elder.

²⁹ See note 1, above.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

and assisted by the canaille of the parish as he seemed to be from the manner in which his braves and Amazons conducted themselves he quite excelled himself and created a pandemonium that must have satisfied his most extravagant aspirations as a leader of men and women. That Mr Forsyth endured their insolent jeers and boorish interruptions with the equanimity he did is creditable to his tact and judgment.³¹

The language of the *Grantown Supplement* report ('howling fanatics', 'canaille', 'pandemonium') surely supports the sense that 'springtime' was in the air in Cromdale. True, actual violence did not break out, but reports suggest that one congregational meeting came close to scrapping: 'A scene of great confusion took place ... the flourishing of fists and the excited aspect of several of those in the pews, nothing more or less than a free fight seemed imminent' – and this in a church 'packed practically from floor-to-ceiling.... It was evident that both parties had marshalled their forces to some effect. They occupied separate sides of the church.'³²

The arguments used in debate at the meetings of the congregation emphasised, not the theology or character of the ministerial candidates, but issues of fair play and justice as the factions tussled with each other and with the Interim Moderator over procedure. Were votes to be taken by ballot, by calling the roll, or by a lobby system? As only a secret ballot could be guaranteed free from external influence, why was the congregation, on occasion, forbidden to use a ballot? Was the Congregational Committee required to *report* (reports could be edited), or to have their full *minutes* read? Could such reports or minutes be challenged at congregational meetings? Could new nominations, not contained in reports or minutes, be promoted at congregational meetings? Who

³¹ 'Cromdale Rowdyism', *Grantown Supplement*, 26 November 1887.

³² *Ibid.*

might be appointed (and by whom?) to assist the few illiterate members as they came to make their vote? The newspaper reports were full of such verbatim items as:

[At the meeting on 5 July 1887]

Mr Mackenzie [of Achvochkie, Advie] – On all former occasions you ruled it was in the power of the congregation to vote as they please. I know that you have instructions at present that the congregation vote in a certain way. We, like many others, are altogether ignorant of the cause; ... we look upon it as an infringement of the rights of the congregation – (loud applause and hisses).

The Moderator – interrupting – ... The matter is in the hands of the Presbytery, and they have it in their power to say in which way the vote should be taken – (applause and hisses). They have that right, and I will not allow it to be challenged – (hisses).

Mr Robert Adam, Auchroisk (heatedly) – I say the decision is not fair justice of the congregation.

The Moderator – I will not allow you to speak that way.

Mr Adam – I don't care what you will allow, I say it is not fair or just to the congregation – (applause and hisses).³³

[At the meeting on 8 November 1887]

A Voice from the back – At the Committee meeting Mr McCowan's name was proposed and seconded, and why is it not on the report? We won't vote until we get some explanation of that. I think the congregation should get fair play – (loud cheers).

Mr Adam – We will have nothing but fair play, you are trying to 'do' us altogether – (applause).

Mr Macpherson, senior, Straan – We have a majority every time, and we don't get the benefit of it. It seems to me that it is the minority here

³³ 'The Vacancy at Cromdale: Appointment again Deferred', *Elgin Courier and Courier*, 8 July 1887.

that get all the rights – (A Voice - 'Quite right', and applause). I wish the reporters to take that down – (laughter).³⁴

The members of the Cromdale congregation were determined to exercise their new democratic rights in choosing their next minister. John McCowan's supporters, both women and men, being a (slender) majority of the congregational roll, were determined that their voices should be heard and their votes counted. It was due to them and they would not be silenced, overridden or ignored without a struggle.

In this heated emotional atmosphere, suspicions abounded. One such was that behind the local Cromdale establishment lay the influence of the Seafield estate. In February 1887, the complaint was reported: 'The Grantown people mean to settle the matter for us'.³⁵ Based in the estate office in Grantown was the Factor, John Grant Smith. Smith, a member of Inverallan Church, was ineligible to take an open part in the business of Cromdale congregation, but in all other public affairs he took the lead, being chair of both the Parochial and the School Boards (as well as, later, of the Parish Council). Moreover, as Factor his was a decisive voice on whether expiring tenancies were re-let to the same family, on whether repairs were made to farm buildings, on whether grants were made for local causes, and many other such matters. Grant of the Haugh, for example, successfully applied to Smith in 1888 for a presentation to a bursary at Aberdeen University for his son.³⁶ There is no extant

³⁴ 'The Cromdale Vacancy: More Difficulties for the Popular Candidate: No Election Yet', *Elgin Courant and Courier*, 11 November 1887.

³⁵ 'The Cromdale Settlement', *Grantown Supplement*, 12 February 1887.

³⁶ NRS, Seafield Papers GD 248/1618: Seafield Estate Private Letter Book, 2: letter to Robert Grant, Post Office, 11 September 1888.

evidence of interference by the estate in the vacancy process,³⁷ but there were those who interpreted John McCowan's victory as a defeat for the Seafield interest. The 'Cromdale Bard', for example, addressing the Revd James Bain:

McCowan has got in,
To be the Cromdale minister at last,
Despite the Presbytery who tried to cast
Him out, as if he were the 'man of sin',
Because thou didst contend through thick and thin
For him, which made the Seafields stand aghast,
And through their puppets blew a final blast,
Before the civil courts to lose or win.³⁸

Again, there is no hard evidence of any such 'aghast' Seafield reaction to John McCowan's election and often during his ministry the estate cooperated fruitfully with him. That there was suspicion of undue influence is nevertheless clear, and this distrust of aristocratic authority takes its place within the 'spring-like' climate of the period.

The poem cited in the last extract was dedicated to Revd James Bain, minister of Duthil, the only minister in the Presbytery of Abernethy who took the side of John McCowan's supporters, entering numerous appeals to the Synod and attending congregational meetings to hassle the Interim Moderator with unasked advice. Bain was a hardened opponent of the Seafield estate

³⁷ Many of the bundles now held as part of the Seafield Papers appear to derive from John Grant Smith's collection of newspaper cuttings and papers associated with his School and Parochial Board duties: NRS, GD248, Papers of the Ogilvie-Grant family, Earls of Seafield (Seafield Papers).

³⁸ 'To the Editor: The Presbytery of Abernethy and the Cromdale Case / Letter by "The Cromdale Bard"', *Scottish Highlander*, 17 January 1889.

and fought his own legal battles in the church and state courts: opposing the Countess Dowager's plans for a second Seafield Mausoleum at the Duthil churchyard, seeking to have his manse repaired, and to have additional glebe allotted.³⁹ His campaigns for justice earned him the titles 'the Ishmaelite of Abernethy Presbytery' and 'the Apostle of Purity before Peace'.⁴⁰ James Bain was considered intemperate. He responded to such complaints:

It is not for any selfish or aggressive object that I am moving in these matters. It is to bring the mighty and the powerful to repentance and to get them to do justice. I think it is far more my duty to attack the high and mighty than to attack the poor and the simple. If you get the high and the mighty to do what is right, they will be setting a good example.⁴¹

This style James Bain brought also to the Cromdale case while speaking at the Synod of Moray:

Mr Bain said that this Cromdale case had all along being an instance of the unfortunate battle between the classes and the masses, for which Strathspey had long been rather notorious. Some people would yet

³⁹ James Bain, *The Seafield Mausoleums and Duthil Churchyard case. A specimen of how officials tamper with the law in Scotland when they want to serve the great* (Elgin, 1885).

⁴⁰ 'Notes by Alius', *Grantown Supplement*, 12 November 1887. Bain had earlier ended a letter to *Elgin Courant and Courier*, 4 November 1887, with the words: 'Before peacc, purity. I remain, Sir, yours, etc, James Bain.' He sought a proper supply of 'pure, good water' for the Duthil School and considered that better value could have been obtained had the contract not been let to the estate by the School Board's chairman, the Factor Grant Smith.

⁴¹ James Bain's speech to the Presbytery of Abernethy, 26 March 1889, reported in 'Petition by Mr Bain', *Elgin Courant and Courier*, 29 March 1889.

boldly act on the principle that might was right. So long as it was the poor that suffered it did not matter, for as soon as anyone complained he was instantly dealt with as a pestilent fellow and a mover of sedition – (laughter) – while the classes well knew that the parasites were at their back to do as the classes would wish it done. ... [A distinguished author] said that when we see the poor oppressed and justice lying wounded and bleeding and left to die under the iron heel of the oppressor, it is the duty of all right-thinking people ... to cheer the oppressed, to repress, to rebuke, and to restrict the oppressor – (applause and laughter). But all history and observation and experience told him that it was very hard and difficult to restrict and restrain the proud oppressor. But on the high authority they were told that no man could with impunity close his ear to the cry of the oppressed. And he was there to say that until the cry of the people of Cromdale was fairly heard on the floor of the Presbytery of Abernethy, he never once interfered, but when he heard the cry his heart was moved, and he felt that for him to be silent would be to repeat the conduct of the pious, proud, and haughty Levite and priest who passed by the man who fell among thieves.... Be that as it may, the people of Cromdale were ready to prove that the priest and the Levite were the Presbytery of Abernethy – were the very parties who, if they had not robbed, had ‘jockeyed’ them out of their legal rights in connection with a matter more precious far to them than gold, namely, the sacred right secured to them by law of electing and settling among them the minister of their choice. But the Presbytery of Abernethy thought proper to be actors art and part with the classes, who were represented in this case by the majority of the Congregational Committee, to defeat the pious aims and wishes of these poor suffering people.⁴²

⁴² ‘The Synod of Moray / Evning Sedcrunt / The refusal to receive a petition’, *Elgin Courant and Courier*, 27 April 1888. See also ‘The Established Synod of Moray and the Cromdale Vacancy’, *Scottish Highlander*, 26 April 1888.

Similarly, an appeal of Bain's against the Presbytery included the following polemic: 'If the Presbytery can be permitted to tamper with the rights and spiritual liberties of the members and adherents of the church as those of the poor have been in this case for the last two and a half years, it is clear that as regards the election and settlement of ministers the Church of Scotland is in a critical state and can no longer be regarded as the Church of the poor.'⁴³ James Bain declaimed that his duty was to stand beside the poor against all established powers when they acted unjustly, whether the Countess Dowager of Seafield and her Factor, or the ruling majority of the Presbytery of Abernethy. His vision for the established Church of Scotland was that of a church for the poor, financially supported by the teinds so that even those without resources could belong. That he had any popular following in Duthil (where there was an active Free Church) is dubious.⁴⁴ Nevertheless his intervention in the Cromdale case strengthened by association contemporary interpretation of the dispute as part of the struggle of the 'masses' against the 'classes'.

Mr Bain's use of the phrase 'the classes against the masses' before the Synod of Moray in 1888 links him to the Rt Hon. William Ewart Gladstone who coined the slogan during a speech in Liverpool in June 1886: Gladstone was Prime Minister at the time.⁴⁵ Indeed, at

⁴³ 'The Presbytery of Abernethy and the Cromdale Case', *Scottish Highlander*, 17 January 1889, published a copy of Mr Bain's dissent and appeal, taken at the Presbytery meeting on 27 November 1888 and read at the Presbytery of 8 January 1889.

⁴⁴ In 1887 only fifteen attended the Harvest Thanksgiving in the parish church. Earlier that year, a lively pro-Seafield mass demonstration had paraded against Revd James Bain in front of his home. 'Duthil', *Elgin Courant and Courier*, 29 November 1887; 'Notes from Duthil' and 'The minister of Duthil', *Elgin Courant and Courier*, 5 April 1887 and 3 May 1887.

⁴⁵ H. C. G. Matthew (ed.), 'Introduction', in *The Gladstone Diaries. Volume 10: January 1881-June 1883* (Oxford, 1990) p. xliii.

the Synod Revd Alex Lawson of Elgin explicitly compared James Bain to Gladstone.⁴⁶ Church affairs do not take place in isolation. Between 1889 (a by-election) and 1895, Cromdale's parliamentary constituency of Elginshire and Nairnshire was held for Gladstone's Liberal Party by John Seymour Keay MP. He laid out his platform at Forres:

What is the cause which we are fighting for under our venerable leader? It is the cause of Liberalism, of the right of every people to self-government, of destruction of the stronghold of class and privilege, of securing that the workers shall retain and enjoy the earnings of their own labour, and of thus securing the greatest possible happiness and prosperity for the whole body of the people – (cheers).⁴⁷

Back in 1868, Elginshire and Nairnshire had been held in the Conservative interest by the Hon. James Ogilvy Grant, later Earl of Seafield and Baron Strathspey. Following the introduction of the secret ballot, however, the constituency turned to the Liberals in 1874 and the Liberal Unionists in 1879. Gladstonian Liberals Charles H. Anderson and John Keay, the latter a self-defined 'Advanced Radical',⁴⁸ held the seat between 1886 and 1895, when the Conservatives were returned. The 1886 swing to the left accorded to a pattern seen across the Highlands following the 1884 Reform Act: in 1892 Keay successfully defeated the Liberal Unionist Sir William Cameron Gull at a time when unionism was

⁴⁶ 'Synod of Moray / Duthil Glebe Case', *Elgin Courier and Courier*, 28 September 1888: 'Were a stranger to arrive in these parts and read nothing but the local prints, ... he would be in great doubt whether the greatest man of the day was Mr Gladstone or Mr Bain – (great laughter).'

⁴⁷ 'Moray and Nairn Election / Mr Keay MP at Forres', *Elgin Courier and Courier*, 24 June 1892.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

gaining strength in Scotland.⁴⁹ Keay's speech at Forres began by defining Liberalism as a class struggle, and especially as a struggle for personal rights. He supported Home Rule in both Ireland and Scotland; he supported the extension of the 1886 Crofters' Holdings Act to Morayshire and more generally to small leaseholders; he supported reform of the land laws, the game laws and of the House of Lords; he advocated disestablishment of the Church of Scotland. He believed he was addressing 'a people who are at length awakened to their own rights and to the wrongs from which they have so long been suffering – (loud cheers)'.⁵⁰ The Cromdale case, demonstrating a determination to exercise civil rights, an impatience with and suspicion of authority and real concern for democratic practice, fits well with Keay's description of his voters as an 'awakened' people.

Nevertheless it is wrong to take James Bain's rhetoric wholly at face value: his description of McCowan's supporters as 'these poor suffering people' was politically-motivated embellishment. The Cromdale case was an inter-farmer dispute, with numerous less influential followers on both sides. McCowan's key opponents, MacGregor of Balmenach and Grant of the Haugh, were clearly part of the social and economic 'establishment' of Cromdale. Beyond them, the appeal to the 1888 General Assembly was sponsored by several of Cromdale's most substantial farmers: John Macainsh of Congash (500 acres, 100 arable); David Rose of Culfoichmore (200 acres, 52 arable), John Robertson of Ballinluig (400 acres, 50 arable); James Dunbar of Shennach (130 acres, 70 arable). Among John McCowan's supporters, however, men like Peter Macpherson, the head gamekeeper; or like other spokesmen for the 'popular' side – Alex Mackenzie of Wester Achvochkie (400 acres, 100 arable), John Mackenzie, Lower Delliefure (a master carpenter), Robert

⁴⁹ T. M. Devine, *The Scottish Nation 1700-2000* (London, 2000), pp. 299–302; Michael Fry, *Patronage and Principle, a Political History of Modern Scotland* (Aberdeen, 1987), pp. 100–103, pp. 108–09.

⁵⁰ Note 47, above.

Adam of Achroisk (20 acres, 16 arable) and John Burgess of Ballinlagg (160 acres, 60 arable) – were men that, while not especially wealthy, were still well capable of taking their place among their peers in the parish. Conversely, the list of those who put their names to the application for interdict against McCowan's induction⁵¹ contained several who were truly poor: Roderick Lamont (Lethendry Cottage), Ann Green (Pollowick), and Ann Calder (Tomlea) were all named within the 'List of Poor Relieved' in the accounts for 1888 published by the Parochial Board.⁵² More generally, it was asserted: 'There was not a single name in the note of suspension ... from whom expenses could be recovered'.⁵³ While some of the followers were undoubtedly poor, the leaders on both sides were capable men of substance – and women, too, for John MacGregor of Balmenach's wife Jeanie ('my imperious grandmother') was credited by Sir Robert Bruce Lockhart with masterminding the continued Balmenach resistance to John McCowan after her husband died on 15 February 1888.⁵⁴

The Cromdale case was finally determined by Lord Wellwood, sitting as Lord Ordinary in the Court of Session in Edinburgh. He decided 'it would be unfair to deprive the congregation of their right of election' in consequence of errors by both the Presbytery and the Interim Moderator the Presbytery had appointed.⁵⁵ Faced with the

⁵¹ NRS, CS240/D/1/2.

⁵² NRS, Scafield Papers GD248/343/3/2: printed leaflet, 'Parish of Cromdale: Parochial and School Board Accounts for year ending 14th May 1888'.

⁵³ 'The Cromdale Church Case', *Scottish Highlander*, 27 September 1888: speech of John McCowan's legal agent Mr Kenneth Macdonald, solicitor, to the Synod of Moray, 25 September 1888.

⁵⁴ Bruce Lockhart, *My Scottish Youth*, p. 200. NRS, SC26/39/17, Elgin Sheriff Court Inventories, for John MacGregor's will: <http://www.scotlandspeople.gov.uk/> [accessed 16 July 2013].

⁵⁵ NRS, CS240/D/1/2: see 'Opinion' dated Edinburgh, 3rd January 1889.

terms of the third section of the 1874 Act (that the church courts had power to decide finally and conclusively upon all questions of fact and law, or mixed fact and law, concerning the appointment, admission and settlement of a minister) Lord Wellwood accepted that church courts had their own proper jurisdiction: so he accepted that the two rulings of the Synod against the Presbytery were conclusive as proof of error. Nevertheless, the case turned on how – strictly or leniently – to interpret the 1874 statute's provision that congregations had only six months to elect their minister. McCowan's election was, after all, nearly 19 months after the declaration of vacancy. Whether this delay was legal, Wellwood ruled, properly fell to the civil courts to decide as only they could interpret statute law.⁵⁶ In the end he held it was more just to support the civil rights of the congregation than to insist that in no circumstances could a calendar six months be exceeded. He thus swung to the side of the Synod, where it had been stated (by Revd A. Lawson) that: 'Parliament and the Church had invested in the majority of the people the right to elect their own minister. The people had got their communion roll. The communicants and adherents who were on that roll were the people entitled to elect a minister, and not any committee.'⁵⁷ Lord Wellwood's adherence to the democratising mood of the times earned him accolades in 'Ye Ballad of Cromdale Militant' which wrote of McCowan's opponents:

The die's now cast,
They look aghast,
Sore beaten in the fight, man.

⁵⁶ Similar issues have since come before the courts: see Marjory A. MacLean, *The Crown Rights of the Redeemer* (Edinburgh, 2009), p. 138f, though *Dunbar v. The Presbytery of Abernethy* is not therein discussed.

⁵⁷ 'Revd A. Lawson speaking in the Synod of Moray', *Scottish Highlander*, 26 April 1888.

In courts they stood
 Sans eloak or hood,
 And Wellwood did the right, man.
 Long live the Queen!
 This wish, I ween,
 Will loyal hearts unite, man:
 And Wellwood, too,
 Her servant true,
 Long live! such knaves to smite, man.⁵⁸

The end of the case did not end the divisions in the parish. Two days after John McCowan's induction, Capt. James MacGregor of Balmenach (who had now succeeded his father as distiller and farmer there) and Robert Grant of the Haugh presented a petition to the Free Church Presbytery of Abernethy requesting that a Free Church be formed in Cromdale. Using supply preachers, a congregation of some 100 people soon began gathering in the schoolhouse.⁵⁹ Their first communion roll, drawn up in 1892, besides Robert Grant included: the now widowed Mrs Rose of Culfoichmore; James Slater the schoolmaster and his probationer-teacher Miss M. P. Smith; James McQueen, a former elder of the established church; and, of course, Mrs MacGregor, though her son James remained an adherent rather than a communicant. Of the twenty-four heads of households listed, nine were described as crofters, five as farmers and one as a grieve; two as roadmen and two as teachers; one was a keeper while Robert Grant was still postmaster.⁶⁰ Three female names did not have occupations listed. Meanwhile John Macainsh of Congash, James Grant of Upper

⁵⁸ 'Cromdale Parish Vaeaney / Ye Ballad of Cromdale Militant'. *Oban Times*, 23 February 1889.

⁵⁹ 'Cromdale: proposed Free Church', *Grantown Supplement*, 16 March 1889; 'Notes from Cromdale', *Grantown Supplement*, 23 March 1889.

⁶⁰ NRS, CH3/1673/4: Cromdale Free Church Communion Roll.

Delliefure, James Dunbar of Shennach, John Grant of Mid Port and Lewis Stuart of the Boat House – five of the ten farmers who had subscribed the appeal to the Assembly – remained with John McCowan's parish church ministry. There had been something of a reversal: now the Cromdale Free Church described itself as a church for the poor, for the crofters.⁶¹ Founded via Balmenach influence, that avenue of funding was lost to Cromdale Free Kirk as John MacGregor had had major debts when he died.⁶² (Under his heir, the distillery became a limited company in 1897.⁶³) Limited membership growth was sustained, partly as existing Free Kirk members came to live in Cromdale. The first Session Clerk was Alexander McHardy, an incomer employee of the railway.⁶⁴ With little of doctrinal substance separating it from the parish church, the congregation joined the United Free Church as 1901 began and rejoined the Church of Scotland at the 1929 Union.

How long did the populist mood of 1886–89 continue in Cromdale? Because the vacancy case concerned decisions of the parish church congregation taken at public meetings and then reviewed in the equally public meetings of the Presbytery and the Synod, substantial local interest was generated. Once a minister is inducted, however, in the Presbyterian tradition the decision-making

⁶¹ 'Notes and Comments/Cromdale Notes', *Grantown Supplement*, 1 June 1895: a paragraph reporting an application by the Free Kirk's Deacons' Court for additional grant from the national Supplementary Sustentation Fund. See also NRS, CS3/1673/2/1, Cromdale Free Church Deacons' Court Minutes, 26 April 1895.

⁶² Bruce Lockhart, *My Scottish Youth*, pp. 200–1. Despite his grandmother's influence Bruce Lockhart's family, during their summer visits to Cromdale, worshipped in the Parish Church considering John McCowan the better preacher.

⁶³ Bruce Lockhart, *My Scottish Youth*, pp. 154–5.

⁶⁴ NRS, CS3/1673/1/1, Cromdale Free Church Kirk Session Minutes, 20 August 1894; 14 September 1894; 24 January 1897.

role of congregational members is reduced. The Cromdale Free Kirk followed the pattern of its denomination and sought to appoint not just its ministers but also its elders and deacons following a vote of the congregation. It was surely deeply ironic that, while the new church was still constitutionally a mission and not a self-standing congregation, its managers failed to consult their members over the choice of the first minister.⁶⁵ Then when a ministerial vacancy occurred in March 1896, a congregational meeting was asked to elect: 'a committee along with the office-bearers for the purpose of taking steps to fill the vacancy. It was then moved and seconded and unanimously agreed to that a committee consisting of the male members of the congregation be appointed'.⁶⁶

Free Kirk democracy had its own patriarchal style. Moreover its elections of elders functioned more like nomination by the congregation than actual election. Members voted to indicate their choice; those who gained most votes were then asked if they wished to take office. In the 1894, in the first election, Alex McHardy won forty votes, Alexander Robertson (snr) of Lethendry thirty-two and James Slater fourteen. Robertson, however, refused office. He had previously been a leading member of Grantown Baptist Church, where his family remained.⁶⁷ Slater had received more votes in the diaconate list and was ordained a deacon. Eventually the new kirk session consisted of Alex McHardy with John McLean and John Stewart, new elders selected by the provisional Session itself, and James McQueen, admitted as a Free Kirk elder having been ordained

⁶⁵ 'Notes and Comments/Cromdale Notes/Aggrieved correspondent', *Grantown Supplement*, 20 January 1894.

⁶⁶ NRS, CS3/1673/1/1, Kirk Session Minutes, 18 March 1896.

⁶⁷ G. Jeffery, *Lethendry, Cromdale, Scotland to Braemar, Oamaru, New Zealand*, p. 84.

in the established church. The result looked very different from the preferences shown in the 'election'.⁶⁸

Meanwhile Revd John McCowan had settled down to his new ministry. Following the defection of James McQueen, the deaths of two of the existing elders and the departure of those living in Advie to their own new charge, new elders were ordained following the traditional practice of cooption by the Session, with no objections by the congregation raised as to life and doctrine. The same procedure of assuming consent if no objections were voiced was followed in 1890 with regard to the timing of Gaelic and English worship⁶⁹ and when an organ was introduced to the church in January 1893, following a major renovation of the fabric.⁷⁰ At least the congregation had been given an opportunity to object: there was no constitutional requirement to do so over such matters of policy. McCowan's modernising tendency next led to the innovation of an extra-constitutional Deacons' Court in 1894 and the search for deacons and additional elders was managed via a consultation with the congregation. The relevant minute read: 'Having taken into consideration the propriety of adding to the number of elders in this parish and having invited and been aided by the opinion of the members of the congregation and being persuaded of the good

⁶⁸ NRS, CS3/1673/1/1, Cromdale Free Church Kirk Session Minutes, 20 August 1894 for the election result and 9 September 1894 for the authority to ordain and admit.

⁶⁹ HAC, CH2/983/4, Cromdale Parish Church Kirk Session Minutes, 25 April 1890: the Session agreed to restart the weekly Gaelic service after the English diet, 'provided no objections are lodged with the Moderator by any of the congregation after due intimation has been made from the pulpit.'

⁷⁰ HAC, CH2/983/4, Cromdale Parish Church Kirk Session Minutes, 24 December 1892: '[The Kirk Session] instructed the Moderator ... to inform [the congregation] that instrumental music will be introduced into the ordinary worship of the sanctuary if no member of the congregation shall personally call upon the Moderator at the Manse and state any valid objection to the same by Saturday first, the 31st current.'

character of'.⁷¹ The careful wording made it plain that, while wider opinions had been invited, the final decision remained with the Kirk Session. In a printed annual Report for 1895, though, McCowan wrote positively of the experience:

In June of last year 12 additional office bearers were ordained, six of these constituting the first Deacons Court formed in connection with our Church. They were all nominated by the Congregation, and could not have been better selected had they been chosen by the Kirk Session itself.⁷²

Similarly, when Session meetings were intimated, it was also announced that: 'Any member of the congregation wishing to bring any matter under the notice of the court will have an opportunity of doing so'.⁷³ These procedures offered wider participation than is often current in the Church of Scotland of the twenty-first century. Through his 1895 Report (cited above) McCowan also encouraged participation in worship. Not all – or even many – ministers would write as he did that the 'most important part of the ordinary service' was the singing, rather than the ministry of the Word. His reason was 'as all can join in it'. This was another mark of his objective, more or less within the normal governance of an established church by minister and elders, to encourage the involvement of the membership in congregational life.

While John McCowan had benefited during the vacancy from the identification of his cause with the popular side the democratising demand that rights must be respected and voices

⁷¹ HAC, CH2/983/4, Cromdale Parish Church Kirk Session Minutes, 27 May 1894.

⁷² A copy of this printed paper is retained in NRS. Seafield Papers. GD248/342/4, Cromdale Parish Trusts.

⁷³ HAC, CH2/983/4, Cromdale Parish Church Kirk Session Minutes, 18 July 1894.

heard, once inducted he faced elements of opposition that arose from another aspect of the 'springtime' climate: impatience with traditional authority. Although James Grant of Upper Delliefure had chosen to remain in the Parish Church, despite his belief that McCowan's election was unconstitutional, he soon fell out with his minister. In May 1892 a couple of iconic beech trees in the churchyard were somewhat crudely pruned and the logs sent to the manse. Grant blamed the minister: 'If the rest of the parishioners would side with me now, we could protest in such fashion against the vandal that his reverence would never again attempt to interfere with a Cromdale landmark as long as he lived.'⁷⁴ Next, in July 1892, Grant fell out with McCowan during a public meeting called by the minister to form a committee to rebuild a suspension footbridge over the Spey adjacent to the church after the former one had been swept away in a spate. Grant was elected chair and McCowan clerk. Grant, however, refused to follow the agenda McCowan proposed and McCowan refused to minute what Grant declared to have been agreed. The *Grantown Supplement* reported: 'Utmost confusion prevailed in consequence, a considerable portion of invective being hurled to and fro by the excitable portion of the audience.... The meeting was one of the most extraordinary ever held in the parish.'⁷⁵

In the bar of the Grantown's Black Bull Hotel, Grant now began a vocal campaign of abuse against the minister. In response, McCowan had him summoned before the Kirk Session of Cromdale for 'using profane language in public places and uttering gross and slanderous language against the Moderator of the Session.'⁷⁶ When

⁷⁴ 'Vandalism in Cromdale; An Epistle from Lettoch', *Grantown Supplement*, 7 May 1892.

⁷⁵ 'Cromdale Bridge – a Rowdy Meeting', *Grantown Supplement*, 2 July 1892.

⁷⁶ HAC, CH2/983/4, Cromdale Parish Church Kirk Session Minutes, 17 July 1892.

eventually a Session meeting was held, Grant so disrupted proceedings that they were abandoned, and Grant was suspended from church privileges until he submitted himself to the discipline of the court. As well as appealing to the Presbytery, Grant counter-sued McCowan in the local Sheriff Court for £1000 damages arising from malicious abuse of authority: and won. Sheriff-Substitute Rampini held against the minister (though he limited the award of damages), on the grounds that the Kirk Session case was merely a cover for a personal vendetta. His judgment spoke of McCowan's:

reckless disregard of legal principles and forms which ... as the ex officio moderator of Session, he must be held to have been bound to know. Explain the matter as he pleases, the fact cannot be gainsaid that, throughout the whole of these proceedings, he was complainer, judge, clerk, and adviser to the court. In the face of the common law of the nation ... he acted as judge in his own cause.... His very apparent animus led him to lose sight of the most elementary principles of law and equity.⁷⁷

The case now proceeded, by way of appeal to the Sheriff, to the Court of Session in Edinburgh. In the end John McCowan was vindicated and awarded damages, the bulk of which Grant avoided paying by declaring himself bankrupt.⁷⁸ The superior civil courts saw, not malice, but only a process not inconsistent with the ordinary proceedings of a rural Kirk Session. James Grant never bowed the knee and remained excommunicated.

⁷⁷ NRS, CS46/1893/8, Decree in appeal, *James Grant v. Revd John McCowan*, 23 August 1893.

⁷⁸ NRS, CS318/38/114: Court of Session, Concluded Sequestration Processes under 1856 Bankruptcy (Scotland) Act, *James Grant*, Upper Dellicfure, Elginshire, Farmer. Bruce Lockhart, *My Scottish Youth*, pp. 206–07, described Grant in his later years.

Nevertheless Grant's challenge had been at first successful, and had had support from the *Grantown Supplement*, which criticised the secrecy of the Kirk Session, advocated 'a very wholesome distrust of the proceedings' and was inclined to believe that the Moderator 'has clearly been prostituting a Church Court for his private and personal ends.'⁷⁹ The weekly paper, reporting that Grant had finally lost, added the result would meet with 'the very general and deep disappointment of a majority of the inhabitants of Strathspey who were versed in the circumstances'.⁸⁰ Earlier, when Sheriff Ivory had overruled his substitute, the *Supplement* questioned: 'But is that the law of Scotland? One would have thought that the days had gone by for serious argument in favour of ecclesiastical despotism like that!'⁸¹ Taken together, the two Court of Session cases involving John McCowan demonstrate a loss of respect for the traditional authority of Kirk Session and Presbytery, a mood shared not just by those locals aggrieved by the procedure and decisions of church courts, but also by elements of civil society. In both cases there were civil courts prepared to uphold the personal rights of citizens despite legal argument that, in these ecclesiastical matters, they had no jurisdiction.

While arguing the case to recognise a 'Strathspey spring' in the 1880s and 1890s, it is important not to overstate. John McCowan did not join James Bain's campaigns against the Countess Dowager and her Factor. Instead he quickly adopted a traditional suitor / benefactor relationship with regard to the Seafield estate. Seeking to renew congregational worship, he sought to realign the interior of the parish church and commissioned an Inverness architect to draw up plans. Next, a congregational meeting petitioned the Countess Dowager seeking funding:

⁷⁹ 'Notes by Alius', *Grantown Supplement*, 14 February 1893.

⁸⁰ 'Notes and Comments', *Grantown Supplement*, 17 June 1893.

⁸¹ 'Appeal to the Court of Session', *Grantown Supplement*, 24 April 1893.

It was further resolved ... to petition her Ladyship on their own account to use her usual kindness by giving her best consideration to the scheme of repairs submitted. Having experienced her Ladyship's well known solicitude and care over the temporal and spiritual welfare of the people, they express their entire confidence in approaching her Ladyship.⁸²

Appropriate funding having indeed been secured, once the work was completed another congregational meeting was held and a deferential letter agreed:

Cromdale Parish Church

19 May 1893

Unto the Honourable the Countess Dowager of Seafield

We the congregation of the Cromdale Parish Church, met in public meeting in the Church on the 19th day of May 1893, hereby tender to your Ladyship our sincere thanks for the munificence with which you so cordially came forward to render all our effects effective in the restoring and beautifying of this building. We can assure you that we are deeply grateful for the service which your Ladyship has rendered to us, the people of this parish. ... We trust that your Ladyship will do us the honour to accept this vote of thanks cordially and unanimously accorded to your Ladyship by your faithful and devoted people in Cromdale, and we hope that you will be long spared to take that lively interest and manifest that unwearied care over your people which has hitherto distinguished both you and the noble family which you represent.

J. McCowan

⁸² HAC, CH2/983/4, Cromdale Parish Church Kirk Session Minutes, 2 March 1891.

Minster of Cromdale and Chairman of the Meeting⁸³

Such a respectfully-worded letter reflected the personal affection for the Countess to which a witness to the Napier Commission testified: 'There is no estate in Scotland to-day in which more respect and affection is shown for the proprietor than in Strathspey'.⁸⁴

There were no riots in Strathspey in the 1880s as there were elsewhere in the Highlands during the 'Land War'. Equally, there were no rent strikes or formal organisations of farmers seeking better conditions as there were to the east, in Aberdeenshire.⁸⁵ In 1911 a memorial volume attributed this to the 'insight and calm courage' of Caroline, Countess Dowager of Seafield, with her 'sagacious, experienced and sympathetic counsellors', and evidenced a 30% reduction of rents in Strathspey in 1886.⁸⁶ The Seafield Factor, John Grant Smith, was elected, via the secret ballot and the wider franchise, time and again to public bodies. Revs John Liddell of Advie Parish Church and Alex McDiarmid of Grantown Free Kirk, men normally opposed, jointly sponsored a motion thanking Smith for his service as Chair of the Cromdale School Board: 'He had taken an immense deal of trouble, ... and had shown great urbanity and courtesy to all the members, assisting them with his advice on every occasion (applause)'.⁸⁷

⁸³ HAC, CH2/983/4, Cromdale Parish Church Kirk Session Minutes, 19 May 1893.

⁸⁴ Evidence of Duncan Lawson, Achnagallin, *The Napier Commission*, IV, p. 2998.

⁸⁵ Carter, *Farm Life in Northeast Scotland*, pp. 167–172.

⁸⁶ *The Right Honourable Caroline, Countess of Seafield born 30th June 1830, died 6th October 1911*, 'mostly reprinted from the Banffshire Journals of October 10 and 17, 1911', loc. 260 of Kindle-format edition made available by the University of Toronto Libraries Internet Archive, <https://archive.org/details/righthonourablec00npbjuoft> [accessed 4 July 2013].

⁸⁷ 'Cromdale School Board', *Elgin Courant and Courier*, 7 June 1893.

The church alterations completed, John McCowan adopted a more populist tone for the next major campaign of his ministry, the reclamation of interest due on bonds held by the Kirk Session but paid by the estate to the Parochial Board for over forty years. The bond derived from legacies to the Session for the benefit of the poor. The Parish Council argued that it was for the poor that the funds were used and McCowan countered that the misappropriated sums were simply subsidising the ratepayers. Eventually a compromise was reached, but at times his language was decidedly populist. The Kirk Session, McCowan claimed, were

endeavouring to do our duty ... representing in this parish the National Church of Scotland, to look after the interests (applause) – aye, the lawful interests of the poor, who, we are proud to think, have irrespective of denomination, for generations been accustomed to look to the church for protection from their oppressors (loud applause). Nor will it in the future prevent us from continuing in what we consider to be the path of duty, even though we know full well that our conduct will secure for us no good will from those who happen to occupy the seats of the mighty amongst us (loud applause).⁸⁸

This could have been written by James Bain and it met with the same ‘loud applause’ as had speeches demanding popular rights during the meetings of the vacancy. McCowan’s ministry blended an establishment lifestyle with an egalitarian veneer. His vocation was as a minister of the national church and he engaged in establishment pursuits: fishing for salmon on the Spey, holding appointment as Chaplain of the Provincial Grand Lodge of Elgin and Moray, and in the Volunteer movement as one of the Chaplains of the 6th Seaforth

⁸⁸ ‘Cromdale Congregational Meeting’, *Elgin Courant and Courier*, 5 March 1901. A copy of this cutting is held in NRS, Seafield Papers GD248/342/5, Cromdale Parish Trusts.

Highlanders.⁸⁹ Yet the vehicle he chose to liaise with the Countess was not the Kirk Session alone but the Congregation, acting via public meetings. Defence of the poor he considered integral to his vocation. This was reflected in the Kirk Session's testimonial to him in 1909: 'In his death the poor and the sick *and the wronged* have lost a *champion*, a helper and a friend.'⁹⁰

'We are living in times of social, political, and ecclesiastical agitation', wrote John McCowan in 1895.⁹¹ He was referring, in part, to the campaign for the disestablishment of the Church of Scotland that had continued since the 1874 Patronage Act, and that gained Gladstone's support in 1889.⁹² With a bill in Parliament in 1894, local branches of the Church Defence Association held meetings in Advie, Cromdale and Grantown, and were countered by a disestablishment meeting in Grantown chaired by its Free Kirk minister.⁹³ The issue divided the Liberal Party in Scotland, and also tended to associate parish church ministers with the Conservatives, the party clearly committed to retaining the establishment. Both McCowan and his neighbour, Liddell of Advie, had gained the 'Tory' epithet by 1891, when both were elected to the Cromdale School Board:

When this Board became elected

⁸⁹ From his obituary, 'The Late Revd John McCowan, Cromdale', *Elgin Courant and Courier*, 28 May 1909.

⁹⁰ NRS, CH2/983/9, Cromdale Parish Church Kirk Session Minutes, 4 June 1909. [italics added by the present author]

⁹¹ NRS, Seafield Papers, GD248/342/4, Cromdale Parish Trusts.

⁹² Andrew L. Drummond and James Bulloch, *The Church in Late Victorian Scotland* (Edinburgh, 1979), p. 79f; A. C. Cheyne, 'Church Reform and Church Defence: The contribution of Principal John Tulloch 1832–1886', *Records of the Scottish Church History Society* 23 (1989), pp. 406–416.

⁹³ 'Advic / Church Defence' and 'Cromdale / Lecture', *Elgin Courant and Courier*, 27 March 1894; 'Disestablishment meeting at Grantown', *ibid*, 27 April 1894.

Donald took the parsons west,
 Gave them more than they expected,
 Liquors of the very best;

Soon he saw they could be twisted
 Round his fingers – so to speak;
 They agree, and are enlisted
 Members of the Tory Clique.⁹⁴

The poem is evidence that neither of the two parish ministers referred to as ‘parsons’ had secure reputations for holding ‘Liberal’ opinions. Their public support for Church Defence cannot have helped to counter this impression, though – in keeping with his modernising frame of mind – John McCowan’s preferred defence was ‘that every parish be alive and look well to its own condition’. He believed Cromdale, with an increasing membership, was ‘living and thriving’, ‘never so strong ... in proportion to the population’.⁹⁵ McCowan’s defence of the National Church of Scotland was that of Principal John Tulloch, to rely on the benefit that a parish church offered its community: ‘the help for the weak, the counsel for the strong’.⁹⁶

Post-1872 democratic-style educational politics attracted much popular interest in Strathspey. Besides Liddell and McCowan, Revd Alex McDiarmid of Grantown Free Church was also elected to the 1891 School Board. In his own way he offered a progressive ministry: a pulpit intimation in Grantown Free Church in June 1892 invited worshippers to stand to sing and remain seated for prayer, a

⁹⁴ NRS, Seafield Papers, GD248/342/2, ‘Vagaries of the Cromdale School Board’ – a printed paper with ms annotation/correction.

⁹⁵ ‘Cromdale / Lecture’, *Elgin Courant and Courier*, 27 March 1894.

⁹⁶ Cheyne, ‘Church Defence and Church Reform’, p. 413.

reversal of the traditional posture: some opposition was provoked.⁹⁷ McDiarmid also played a progressive role in the School Board. Pressed by him, supported by James Bain, a review began of education at Grantown School, generally believed to be failing the area. Initially, Bain had moved a more peremptory course:

Again, the Chair a motion made,
He thought it would be fair and just
That we keep Hunter on as 'head',
And find another to assist.

Bain then had a counter motion –
Grantown School was a disgrace;
So, to quiet outside commotion,
One more fit must fill his place.

Fourteen years of parent blinding,
Fourteen years he was the 'head',
And tho' pupils were kept grinding,
Not a scholar had he made.⁹⁸

Mr Hunter, the existing headmaster, soon resigned, despite support from 'The Chair' – the Seafield Factor, Grant Smith. John D. Rose MA (from the Free Church Training College, Glasgow) was appointed. For the first time there were sufficiently well-educated staff to allow Grantown Grammar School to offer secondary

⁹⁷ 'Free Church Innovation', *Grantown Supplement*, 11 June 1892: 'The very considerable response made showed that the great bulk of the congregation were in sympathy with the innovation.'

⁹⁸ NRS, Seafield Papers, GD248/342/2, 'Vagaries of the Cromdale School Board'.

education up to university entrance level, fulfilling McDiarmid's election promises.⁹⁹

Strathspey's educational politics, as well as the ecclesiastical, demonstrate local concern for democratic process: this area, too, offered opportunities to oppose traditional authority whether aristocratic or ecclesiastical. Standing for election to the School Board, at least initially, in 1894 was Alexander Robertson (jnr) of Lethendry, a member of Grantown Baptist Church,¹⁰⁰ whose personal statement at the hustings invited his audience to 'clear out the whole lot of the ministers': 'I have no doubt that the electors think they should be all cleared out of the Board'. Robertson attempted to persuade an electors' meeting in Cromdale schoolhouse to back him and to 'if possible, exclude the clerical element as candidates'. The result of the meeting was disputed. Two of Cromdale's leading Free Church members, A. L. Coulson of the Inland Revenue and Grant of the Post Office, proposed a counter-motion: 'that Mr Robertson was neither a fit nor a proper person to represent them at the School Board' and, by one account, this carried 'amid loud applause'.¹⁰¹ Another correspondent, however, noted that as Mr Coulson was not a ratepayer he could not move motions at such a meeting, hence the proposal to support Robertson had carried.

⁹⁹ 'Cromdale School Board Election / Lively Meeting of Ratepayers / Heckling of the Candidates', *Moray and Nairn Express: The Northern Scot*, 4 April 1891: press-cutting retained in NRS, Seafeld Papers, GD248/342/2. A questioner at a pre-election hustings had asked 'How it was that so many parents were compelled to send their children to Aberdeen Grammar School?' and McDiarmid had said 'he was in favour of much more being done in the matter of secondary education in Grantown'.

¹⁰⁰ Jeffery, *Lethendry, Cromdale, Scotland to Braemoray, Oamaru, New Zealand*, p. 84f.

¹⁰¹ 'Cromdale / Public Meeting', *Elgin Courant and Courier*, 2 March 1894.

being technically unopposed.¹⁰² In the event Robertson withdrew his candidature before the poll and three of the new Board of seven were ministers: Revs. Alex McDiarmid, James Bain and William Green, minister of Grantown's Inverallan Parish Church.¹⁰³

'The spread of education', closely allied with 'ambition to rise in the world', may be considered part of the 'Strathspey spring' of this period. The two were associated with the mood of the times at a meeting of the Carr Bridge Debating Club in November 1887. On the topic of the causes of 'the continued decrease of population in Duthil', one side 'contended that the spread of education, improved means of locomotion, ambition to rise in the world ... must be held responsible for ... the depopulation of the district.' On the other side, it was argued that the blame should fall 'about equally on the laird, the large farmers, and the policy of converting hill crofts and pastures into large sheep runs or extensive plantation'. The well-attended meeting voted 'about equal on both sides'.¹⁰⁴ In neighbouring Cromdale, too, there was a sense that the young were leaving: 'the population of the parish has greatly decreased' was an argument used by the Cromdale Free Church to support its appeal for additional grant from the Supplementary Sustentation Fund.¹⁰⁵ In fact, Cromdale's census returns for 1881, 1891 and 1901 show a small increase in the first decade, from 712 to 761, and then a more marked decrease in the second, from 761 to 635. Analysis shows it was the segment of younger adults, those between thirty-one and

¹⁰² 'The Cromdale Meeting – To the Editor' subscribed 'The Square', *Elgin Courant and Courier*, 9 March 1894.

¹⁰³ 'Grantown / School Board', *Elgin Courant and Courier*, 30 March 1894.

¹⁰⁴ 'Duthil', *Elgin Courant and Courier*, 29 November 1887.

¹⁰⁵ NRS, CS3/1673/2/1, Cromdale Free Church Deacons' Court Minutes, 26 April 1895.

forty-five, that had diminished.¹⁰⁶ Faced with the falling prices of the agricultural depression, and with no new land available locally, young men and women increasingly looked elsewhere 'to rise in the world.'¹⁰⁷ There was keen interest in the public lectures John McCowan gave on his holiday in Canada.¹⁰⁸ Alexander Robertson (jnr) of Lethendry – which was one of Cromdale's larger farms (193 acres, 104 arable) – emigrated to New Zealand in 1902.¹⁰⁹

Although life in Strathspey in the 1880s and 1890s remained law abiding, with (except from James Bain) a deferential courtesy still followed with regard to the Countess Dowager of Seafield, prescriptive authority whether aristocratic or ecclesiastical was being challenged. Ordinary people expected that their voices should be heard and their votes counted. There was a keen interest in public affairs: people turned out for public meetings, whether of the Cromdale Congregation, or the ad hoc Suspension Bridge Committee, or the hustings associated with the local Boards or Parliamentary elections. In the young Scottish democracy, key issues included who had a right to participate, and with what areas of life

¹⁰⁶ These figures are drawn from Cromdale registration districts 1, 2, 5 and 6a, with Abernethy district 8. Advie districts are excluded. Census records via <http://scotlandspeople.gov.uk/> [accessed 1 June 2013]

¹⁰⁷ Cf Carter, *Farm Life in Northeast Scotland*, p. 177.

¹⁰⁸ 'Achnarow, Cromdale – Lecture on Canada', *Elgin Courier and Courier*, 23 January 1894: 'The Revd Mr McCowan, who has recently returned from an extensive tour in Canada, delivered an exceedingly interesting lecture in the Public School here. There was a very large attendance of the general public, many coming from Advie and the outlying districts.' Also, 'Cromdale / Lecture on Canada', *Elgin Courier and Courier*, 23 February 1894: 'The Revd Mr McCowan ... gave a lecture on Canada ... there was a very large attendance, the church being crowded in every part. It was perfectly evident that great interest was taken in the event by the inhabitants of Cromdale.'

¹⁰⁹ Jeffery, *Lethendry, Cromdale, Scotland to Braemar, Oamaru, New Zealand*, p. 84f.

they might be involved, together with the apparently technical but still crucial questions of process: how participation should be organised.¹¹⁰ Substantial disputes over these sort of issues, fought out in public meetings and between times in the press, have been recounted.

Much detail has been cited from the local newspapers, *The Grantown Supplement* and *The Elgin Courier and Courant*, whose reporters offered lengthy verbatim reports for a literate public. The 1885 General Election demonstrated 'a period of unprecedented politicisation in the Highlands', with the Highland press 'very much at the forefront of the election campaign, helping to mobilise the electorate'.¹¹¹ The Strathspey population also fought out their local campaigns via letters to the papers and by giving press reporters access to the text of speeches, petitions and appeals. Editorial interest was commented on in relation to the Cromdale case: 'A certain local paper just now is giving more space in its correspondence columns than the bulk of us care to see, and certainly more than the quality of the correspondence deserves'.¹¹² 'Anonymous missives characterised by eccentric diction and orthography are circulating freely in the district and are significant of the feeling which the question arouses among a section of the community.'¹¹³ The circulation of carefully composed satirical poetry also testifies to the extent to which the 'Cromdale

¹¹⁰ S. Verba, 'Democratic Participation', *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, vol. 373, Social Goals and Indicators for American Society (September 1967), II, p. 54, via <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1037353> [accessed 14 August 2013].

¹¹¹ S. M. Kidd, 'Burning issues: reactions to the Highland Press during the 1885 election campaign', *Scottish Gaelic Studies* (2008) p. 302, via <http://eprints.gla.ac.uk/4774/> [accessed 28 June 2013].

¹¹² 'Cromdale Notes', *Grantown Supplement*, 19 March 1887.

¹¹³ 'Notes by Alius', *Grantown Supplement*, 28 May 1887; 'Notes by Alius', *Grantown Supplement*, 8 October 1887.

Ecclesiastical Comedy'¹¹⁴ held popular interest both in Strathspey and across the Highlands, 1886–89.¹¹⁵

The established church was not immune from the Strathspey 'Springtime', the lively democratising climate that this article seeks to demonstrate was present in the 1880s and 1890s. Controversies arising from church matters, or from the involvement of ministers in the wider life of the area, provide evidence for concern for personal rights; for an intense, informed, awakened interest in public matters; for suspicion of prescriptive authority. The awakening had its limits. Church people were, certainly, concerned about educational structures and outcomes. There was, though, little public support for the crofters who in 1892 complained of encroachments from Castle Grant.¹¹⁶ The local press only briefly aired the ploughmen's search

¹¹⁴ Letter by 'High Street' / 'Cromdale Rowdyism', *Grantown Supplement*, 26 November 1887.

¹¹⁵ Four-line anonymous stanza 'This parish, Lord, have mercy on', 'Advertisement / The Prayer of the Cromdale Men', *Grantown Supplement*, 1 October 1887; 20-verse anonymous narrative 'In eighteen hunder an' eighty six', 'The Cromdale Vacancy', as handed down at Upper Port, Cromdale: typed and from an original manuscript; 14-line sonnet 'Rejoice, O Bain, McCowan has got in' by 'The Cromdale Bard', 'To the Editor: The Presbytery of Abernethy and the Cromdale Case', *Scottish Highlander*, 17 January 1889; Five anonymous verses in Scottish traditional ballad-form 'How it befell | 'Twere long to tell, | But time embittered strife, man', 'Ye Ballat of Cromdale Militant' in 'Cromdale Parish Vacancy', *Oban Times*, 23 February 1889; 14-verse anonymous narrative 'On Thursday last wi' a' the lave', 'Poem Descriptive of the Induction of The Revd Mr McCowan', *Grantown Supplement*, 16 March 1889; 30-verse anonymous polemic 'Vagaries of the Cromdale School Board', a printed paper retained in Seafield Papers, NRS, GD248/342/2.

¹¹⁶ Letter by 'Camerorie', 'Ballieward Crofters', *Grantown Supplement*, 24 December 1892; 'Notes and Comments / Pretext for refusing', *ibid*, 14 January 1893.

for better pay, conditions and housing.¹¹⁷ These economic justice issues received attention from visiting politicians,¹¹⁸ but featured only occasionally in local debate and not at all in parish or presbytery courts. Seafield influence remained strong.

Three trends within the church personnel and structures here studied may be identified, in conclusion, as flowing from this awakening. First, in both Cromdale congregations there was an increased concern to consult with the wider congregation, to hear members' voices on the appointment of office-bearers and on major policy decisions. Then, albeit slowly and somewhat reluctantly, in both the established Synod of Moray and the Presbytery of Abernethy there was a growing awareness of the negative impact of publicity about their debates and conversely a growing awareness of responsibility to the public outside. Lawson of Elgin successfully argued in the Synod that 'it would be a most disastrous business *if it should go forth to the people of the North* that [anyone] ... could deprive the congregation of their undoubted right to elect a minister – (applause)'.¹¹⁹ Unsuccessfully arguing for a commission of enquiry into James Bain's allegations that the Presbytery was colluding with the Seafield estate against him, Revd W. Dunbar Dey argued: 'I find also that *amongst the general public beyond the Presbytery* there is always apt to be sympathy for any man who cannot get *a full and fair hearing*'.¹²⁰ Mr Dey was thirty-eight at the

¹¹⁷ 'Farm Labourer', 'Ploughman's grievances', *Grantown Supplement*, 14 January 1893.

¹¹⁸ Especially from John Seymour Keay: 'We say "The land for the people" while they say "The land for the landlords" and let the people shift for themselves.': 'Moray and Nairn Elections / Mr Keay at Grantown', *Elgin Courant and Courier*, 5 July 1892.

¹¹⁹ Revd A. Lawson speaking in the Synod of Moray, *Scottish Highlander*, 26 April 1888. Emphasis added by the present author.

¹²⁰ 'Presbytery of Abernethy / The Duthil Glebe', *Elgin Courant and Courier*, 15 June 1888. Emphasis added by the present author.

time. The Presbytery's opinion-leader, however, Revd Dr Kenneth Mackenzie, approaching his sixtieth birthday, had little sympathy with the view that public opinion was a valid concern of a church court. Finally, allied to a widening understanding of the church's place in society, came a growing concern to support 'the wronged' against authority. This formed a considerable part of Revd James Bain's rhetoric; it was also a part, in a more nuanced way, of Revd John McCowan's ministry. Both ministers' advocacy of the Church of Scotland as a national church contained the belief that it must be a church for the poor. Meanwhile the new Cromdale Free Kirk also tried to present itself as a church for the crofters. The full implications of such ideals were hardly realised and there is no evidence in the speeches reported (apart from those of Revd James Bain) that theological reflection played any part in these Strathspey debates.¹²¹ Rather, ecclesiastical procedures were being assessed against new, civil, criteria of fairness and respect.

The events of the 'Strathspey spring', part of a wider democratisation of British society, demonstrate grass-root pressures and tensions that drew new responses from some at least of the church members, ministers and courts caught up in the 'dirdum'. The Cromdale case offers a fine example of just how 'The onset of mass democracy, the spread of literacy ... and the rise of a cheap press' impacted on the procedures and attitudes of local church life.¹²² The stories told here thus help to explicate Prof. Alec Cheyne's second, transitional, phase of the 'social revolution' in the Scottish churches: the period of the 1880s and 1890s when (he claimed) 'fresh, almost revolutionary attitudes' can be observed – not just at the national levels traditionally studied but also at the

¹²¹ Cf theological debates on the nature of the Kingdom of God described in: Johnston McKay, *The Kirk and the Kingdom: A Century of Scottish Social Tension, 1830-1929*, (Edinburgh, 2012), pp. 65–100.

¹²² Cheyne, *Transforming of the Kirk*, pp. 132–33; and see note 4 above.

grassroots.¹²³ Democratisation, and especially a democratisation supported by popular sentiment of the 'springtime awakening' variety, introduces complexity to society. With complexity comes flexibility and opportunity. Revd James Bain believed it his duty to his Lord 'to cheer the oppressed, to repress, to rebuke, and to restrict the oppressor' and he sought to take whatever opportunities were offered, whether through the Presbytery of Abernethy, the Cromdale School Board or the Scottish civil courts. Johnston McKay has demonstrated that, during the first decade of the twentieth century, the United Free Church in particular was debating at Assembly level a theological response to the widening scope for social involvement. Some wished to draw back, others to engage more fully with a social theology, with the opportunities of democracy.¹²⁴ As the twentieth century progressed, however, McKay argues, 'The emergence of social criticism and theology ... was regarded as of less importance than purely ecclesiastical concerns.'¹²⁵ The level of involvement by church members in the decision-making processes of the Church of Scotland has declined even from the moderate level attained by John McCowan's Cromdale.

Tigh an Iasgair, Boat of Garten

¹²³ Cheyne, *Transforming of the Kirk*, pp.127–8, p. 153.

¹²⁴ McKay, *The Kirk and The Kingdom*, p. 84f.

¹²⁵ *Ibid*, p. 4.

